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SUBJECT: POST-ELECTION ZAMBIA: A WORLD OF UNCERTAINTY

REF: A. LUSAKA 1034
[B.](#) LUSAKA 1033
[C.](#) LUSAKA 1032
[D.](#) LUSAKA 1030

Classified By: Ambassador Donald E. Booth, reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Summary. As Zambians head to the polls on October 30, they and we are faced with many uncertainties, not only over who will be the next President of Zambia, but also what the transition will look like and how the new President will rule. In true Zambian style, however, the two leading candidates appear at this point to offer an empty "style over substance" choice that ultimately will not result in huge policy differences, at least in the short term. While the USG cannot expect either Rupiah Banda or Michael Sata to fully fill the shoes of former president Mwanawasa (especially on Zimbabwe and the fight against corruption), neither should we expect the Zambian ship of state to suddenly lurch wildly off course. The key will be early USG engagement with whoever wins the election in order to deliver a message of continued partnership, continuity in the bilateral relationship and sustained support. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) The race between presidential front-runners Rupiah Banda and Michael Sata remains extremely tight, but with local polls and anecdotal evidence pointing to Sata pulling ahead, in the final days before election day on October 30. All campaigns are planning final election rallies in Lusaka on October 29, and Embassy election monitors have begun to deploy around the country. The candidates appear determined to end their campaigns on pretty much the same notes that they began with - Banda with bland promises of continuing tax cuts and ruling party largesse, Sata with fiery and farfetched populist rhetoric (recent entries include a cure for HIV/AIDS within 90 days of his election and the closure of the South Africa-owned Zambezi Sun hotel for ludicrous accusations of labor abuses), and Hakainde Hichilema with forgettable but technically sound proposals for economic growth. No one seems to know or wish to report on what Heritage Party candidate Godfrey Miyanda is saying.

[¶3.](#) (C) While voters may feel that they face a stark choice between the front-runners -- the affable but weak Banda and the mercurial but enduringly popular Sata -- their choice ultimately comes down to a very Zambian one of style over substance. On the surface, a Banda administration offers continuity, but Banda is a weak leader presiding over a fractured ruling party, and he is assumed to be a lame duck by a party machine that will try its best to ensure he doesn't run for president again in 2011. Similarly, Sata's bombastic style does not necessarily translate into actual policy, as his rhetoric is usually tempered by the sound counsel of trusted and savvy Patriotic Front (PF) parliamentarians who will become ministers should Sata be elected. Sata will also be faced with a Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) majority in Parliament, which could constrain some of his more outlandish initiatives if MMD MPs don't defect en masse in order to curry favor with a Sata presidency.

[¶4.](#) (C) Neither Sata nor Banda has the leadership or inclination to follow in the increasingly principled footsteps of former president Mwanawasa. Zimbabwe is a good example - Banda, who has a long personal relationship with

Zimbabwean president Mugabe, has so far shown himself to be weak and indecisive in dealing with the issue, and the GRZ did not choose to send or express any interest in sending a representative to recent SADC meetings on Zimbabwe.

Meanwhile, Sata has traditionally embraced Robert Mugabe as an ally, and made a very public and premature invitation to Mugabe to attend his (Sata's) presidential inauguration in 2006. Substantiated rumors of corruption also surround Banda, his family and many of his cronies, and while Sata has made some noises about continuing the prosecution of the criminal case against former president Chiluba, his commitment to Mwanawasa's anti-corruption legacy is doubtful.

15. (C) Comment. Although a Sata win would be a roller coaster ride, it would represent the first transfer of power since the end of one-party rule in 1991 and would be a step forward for Zambian democracy - assuming that Sata would respect the democratic principles that brought him into power. Whoever the winner, the Embassy maintains good contacts in both the Banda and Sata camps and is confident that communication lines will remain open. Per reftel A, Banda in particular was on message when the Ambassador presented his credentials, and even Sata has expressed enthusiasm for an Open Skies agreement with the U.S. - a priority that has languished under the current administration. One key will be to establish early contact with a Banda or Sata administration in order to reaffirm the USG commitment to a partnership with the GRZ and to send messages on USG priorities. End comment.

BOOTH